

CAN SEX IDENTITY BE DEFINED?

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This paper tries to argue for a definition of sex identity which uses Scriven's introduction of 'normic' properties as a category of properties which are neither synthetic nor analytic. It argues against Sex Polarity which depends upon analytic properties of sex identity; and it argues against Sex Unity which claims that all properties of sexual differentiation are synthetic. The normic properties included in a definition of Sex Duality are taken from the three broad areas of social-biological, social-psychological, and social political properties of sex identity.

## CAN SEX IDENTITY BE DEFINED?

### Analytic, Synthetic, and Normic Properties

The history of the attempt to find a definition of women and of men has vasciallated between two extremes. On the one hand, some philosophers have looked for what might be termed essential or analytic properties which would be universally and eternally associated with woman or man. On the other hand, other philosophers have claimed that there are no such analytic properties which differentiate the sexes and they concluded that all sex linked properties are synthetic, accidental, or arbitrary in their application. For the purposes of simplification I will call the theory which claims to have discovered analytic properties of sex Sex Polarity and the theory which claims that the sexes are only synthetically differentiated as Sex Unity. It is the basic thesis of this paper that these two extreme alternatives create a false dilemma in the attempt to define sex identity. This false dilemma is not confined to problems of definition of sex identity alone but has plagued philosophy in many areas and for many centuries. Morton White states it as follows: "I think that the problem is clear, and that all considerations point to the need for dropping the myth of a sharp distinction between essential and accidental predication (to use the language of the older Aristotelians) as well as its contemporary formulation --- the sharp distinction between analytic and the synthetic." (1) One way of dropping the distinction is to blur the differences between the analytic and the synthetic. Another way is to introduce a third category in between the two extremes. While White chooses the former, Hilary Putnam chooses the latter. He states: "If one wants to have a model of language, it is far better to proceed on the idea that statement fall into three kinds --- analytic, synthetic, and lots-of-other things ---than to proceed on the idea that, except for borderline fuzziness, every statement is either analytic or synthetic." (2)

Michael Scriven has tried to delineate this third category which Putnam calls generally 'lots-of-things' by introducing the term 'normic'. "Any property that is connected with another in such a way that it does not make sense to deny its application will be said to be analytically connected with it, as e.g., brotherhood is connected with siblinghood. A property that does not meet this requirement, but which would have to occur in a thorough explanation of the meaning of a term nonetheless, will be said to be normically connected with it. Other connections will be called synthetic." (3) Scriven is speaking of properties and not of propositions in his discussion, but the necessity for a third category between the two extremes of analytic and synthetic is equally evident in both sorts of areas. Scriven's introduction of

the category 'normic' is extremely useful in discussions of definitions of sex identity.

It should be mentioned at this point that the debate between real and nominal definitions also falls into the same rigid bind that the analytic and synthetic distinction fosters. For this reason it is better to say that we are speaking here both about what the terms 'man' and 'women' mean and also about what a woman and man is. A delineation of analytic and normic properties will enable us to do both of these things.

Scriven uses the example of a lemon in explaining his notion of normic property. Being a fruit is an analytic property whereas being from California is a synthetic property of lemons. The normic properties form a conjunction: having a sour taste, having yellow or green skin with a waxy texture, being the fruit of a particular tree, having an ovoid shape, coming in a certain range of sizes, and having a certain range of hardness. Any one of these normic properties might be missing and yet we would still call the thing a lemon. They cannot therefore be thought of as analytic. Their denial would not be self contradictory. And yet their connection with the thing is not as arbitrary as coming from California.

We could say, using the above schema that being a person or being a human being is an analytic property of being a woman or being a man.(4) Since this property is shared by both women and men and since it is a necessary property, it is needed in definition, but it is not helpful in differentiating the two from one another. To differentiate we must turn to normic properties, for as hard as we look there appear to be no analytic properties which differentiate women from men. We can find at least one example of a woman or man who does not have the proposed property.

In choosing the route of normic properties the claim that the absence of analytic properties implies that all differentiatly properties of women and men must be synthetic also has to be refuted. In other words, the rejection of Sex Polarity, the view that there are analytic properties of sex identity seems to some to imply to the necessary acceptance of Sex Unity. It is this seeming necessity that I wish to refute by introducing the notion of a normic definition of sex identity. I call my theory Sex Duality to distinguish it from Sex Polarity and Sex Unity.

Sex Polarity has been one of the predominant views in the history of philosophy. It views women and men as polar opposites. A certain property (x) must be present in a woman or she is not a 'real' woman. It's opposite (y) must be present in a man. While the properties vary the polarity remains. The properties may be biological, epistemological, or social political. Aristotle, Kant, Rousseau, Freud, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, are some of the philosophers who exemplify Sex Polarity. Often the analyticity is hidden in these theories. While the philosophy appears to be describing human identity when a closer look is taken, women do not have or can not have this identity.(5)



Sex Unity is predominately contemporary and has developed partly by way of reaction against Sex Polarity. In its strong form Sex Unity claims that there are no significant properties which differentiate women from men. One of the consequences of this theory is that although there may be identifiable sex differences at the present time, in the future with the proper socialization these differences will no longer exist. Firestone calls this the "disappearance of (the) sex...distinction"(6) The same theory in a weaker form claims that although some physiological differences between the sexes will always exist, the sex distinctions must be de-institutionalized. Jaggar calls this theory 'sex-integration' and summarizes it by stating: "When people complain that you can't tell the boys from the girls nowadays, the feminist response must be to point out that it should make no difference."(7) By accepting the traditional split between analytic and synthetic properties, and by believing that there are no analytic properties which differentiate the sexes the theory of Sex Unity concludes that all properties are synthetic and therefore non essential and non significant to either sex. Firestone accomplishes this by a complete rejection of woman's biological role in reproduction and naive trust in the eventual success of test tube babies. Jaggar preserves the reproductive element in sex identity but does not find other differences between women and men to be significant in an explanation of sex identity. While the intention of proponents of Sex Unity is the commendable goal of routing out sex discrimination, the result is a loss of real and significant duality in the identity of women and men. It should not be necessary to blur the differences between women and men to achieve an egalitarian society.

In returning to Scriven's introduction of normic properties, we must note a crucial distinction between his choice of example, a lemon, and my application of this theory to women and men. The presence of consciousness in women and men and therefore, the possibility of self definition means that the complexity of the object being defined has increased enormously. Specifically, consciousness means that women and men have a history. In fact we have different histories qua women and qua men. One of the crucial tasks in developing a definition of sex identity is to clarify exactly what relation we have to our respective histories. Sex Polarity claims that history is destiny. Sex Unity implies that history is superfluous. Sex Duality states emphatically that history must be appropriated and then moved beyond. This means that women and men can never be the same. Their respective histories give a different starting point.(8)

The above claim of the logical impossibility of the Sex Unity position has been strongly objected to by feminists who hope that eventually there will be no significant difference between the sexes. While it has not been directly stated as such, I think they have in mind the American experience of the disappearance of national (mostly European) origins of the new American population. The hidden assumption is that after many generations the distinction between women and men can disappear. To counter this argument, we must point out that in the case of sex identity there are daily factors, continuously being integrated into a personal identity, which we call normically connected with being a woman or a man. This daily

contact with one's own normic properties of sex identity is rather different from a situation in which one leaves a country and has no contact with it at all. We cannot leave the country of our sex identity. An example might help to strengthen my claim. In a duet a tenor and a contralto may sing the same note. This does not mean that they are the same. Their starting point is different. In the same way a woman and man may have the same gender trait, but they are not the same. Their duality is like the duet of the tenor and the contralto. The traditional use of only analytic or synthetic properties just cannot account for the properties found in the delineation of the identity of woman and man.

### Sex Linked Properties

#### A. Social-Biological Properties

The area which has traditionally been strongest in Sex Polarity has been the collection of social-biological properties. Until recently genetics has been used as the defining characteristic of women and men. The decision of physicians to change a person with xx chromosomes into an anatomical male or to change a person with xy chromosomes into an anatomical female means that specific chromosomes may no longer be accepted as an analytical property of being a woman or a man.(9) The fact that the law in the United States and Canada agreed to recognize an anatomically female person as a woman regardless of chromosomes confirms the end of the use of chromosomes as an analytic property.

A philosophical puzzle arises, however, when an olympic committee insists on using a chromosome test before letting athletes compete. This seems to imply that it is an arbitrary matter and that each group may determine what criteria are appropriate to it. The tendency then is to fall back into the Sex Unity position and to decide that all properties are synthetically or arbitrarily connected with sex identity.

Sex Duality, however, insists that even though there may be circumstances in which a group may choose to call someone female or male for the purposes of that group, that it is wrong to conclude from this what it is to be a woman or man is arbitrary. For example, in a school there may be an uneven number of girls or boys in a folk dance class and the teacher may say to the tall children that they should be the boys and the short ones the girls, for the purposes of the dance. It would not follow from this that the differences between the boys and the girls are arbitrary.

In the biological area the normic properties of sex identity include those properties which are needed in a thorough explanation of a woman or a man. Clearly the presence of xx chromosomes, vagina, uterus, clitoris, breasts, ovaries, pregnancy and a predominance of estrogen are normic properties of a woman. Similarly xy chromosomes, the penis, testes, and a

predominance of testosterone and progesterone, semen production are normic properties of men. These properties are normic because they are needed to describe what it is to be a woman and a man. They are not arbitrarily connected with sex identity. They are also normic because any one of them could be missing and the person could still be either a woman or a man. That is, no property here is analytic. They could not all be missing however. Furthermore, the absence of any particular property seems to call for some sort of explanation.(10) A reason should be able to be given for the absence of any property. For example, a woman may have had a breast removed because of cancer, or a man may have stoped his capacity for semen production through a vasectomy. A woman would not be expected to give a reason for why she does not produce semen or a man for why he was not pregnant.

A synthetic property, if arbitrary, should not have the same strength of demand for explanation. However, in many situations people seem to confuse synthetic properties with normic properties. For example, when parents were distressed at the sight of their sons in long hair or of their daughters in shortbobs their reaction implied that they took length of hair to be a sign of a normic property of sex identity. In general, however, it is only the normic properties which demand an explanation. This demand is directly related to the fact that the property is needed in a thorough explanation of the thing.

## B. Social-Psychological Properties

The second area which has traditionally contained sex linked properties is social-psychological. More commonly, this concerns the relation of sex to gender traits. It is here that some feminists seem most determined to destroy any distinction between the sexes. Clarence Keegan has recently expressed this by saying that gender is an accidental, not essential aspect of sex. She concludes with the claim that feminism should be a theory that does not refer to gender at all.(11) This kind of claim for the Sex Unity position seems to follow from a discovery that any gender trait which may have been closely identified with one sex appears to occur in members of the opposite sex. It is further concerned with the fact that certain gender traits are more highly valued in some cultures than others. Therefore, in a situation where female gender traits are devalued it is though better to destroy the association of any gender trait with a particular sex in order to achieve the liberation of women. This argument seems to me, however, to be based upon the rigid distinction between the analytic and synthetic referred to previously. It claims, if a gender trait is not an analytic property then it must be synthetic, or accidental, and arbitrary, and therefore it can be easily discarded if circumstances warrant it.

The position of Sex Duality wants to forge a third alternative by claiming that women or men are normically connected to the collection of gender traits which have been historically associated with each sex. This collection



is culture bound and in our particular North American and European culture the general gender traits of passivity and irrationality have been associated with women while activity and rationality have been associated with men. This polarity is seen in Kant's division between sense and reason. Aristotle's division between obeying and ruling, Kierkegaard and Stern's division between intuition and reflection, deBeauvoir and Sartre's division between immanence and transcendence, Mill's distinction between concrete and abstract thought, Jung's distinction between the anima and animus and Nietzsche's distinction between Dionysian and Apollonian thought. Sex Polarity traditionally differentiated gender traits which either sex was thought to have as essential properties.

Contemporary psychological research has reinforced this gender differentiation by distinguishing women from men in terms of simple motor skills and complex motor skills (Broverman, et.al. 1968), verbal skills and motor skills (Garai and Scheinfeld 1968), memory and problem solving (Hutt 1972, Milton 1957), dependence and independence (Bardwick and Douvan, 1971), fear of success and fear of failure (Horner 1972) and passivity and aggressivity as a component in research (Hebb 1974). In all of these cases the association of women with simpler and more passive gender traits and men with more complex and active gender traits is found. Sex Polarity theorists have used this data to support a view that there are analytic sex differences. Sex Unity theorists however, have begun to show that questions used in this kind of research bias the results, that conclusions are worded in such a way that the results are biased, and that journals tend to accept articles which show 'statistically significant sex differences' and reject articles which have no such significant differences reported. (Favreau 1975, 1977, Tresemer 1976). (12)

The temptation is to conclude that there are no significant gender traits related to either sex. If we return to the concept of a normic property as being needed in a thorough explanation of the thing, however, it is important when defining woman or man to include a specific reference to the gender traits associated with either sex. To be a woman in our culture means to have a normic relation to the collection of gender traits associated with passivity and irrationality. To be a man in our culture means to have a normic relation to the collection of gender traits associated with activity and rationality. It does not imply that to be a woman means to be passive or that to be a man means to be active. A woman merely has a different relation to passivity than does a man. If the tenor and contralto sing the same note it is not the same thing. The tenor must move upwards to the note and the contralto downwards. Similarly a woman who is active, or who develops her problem solving capacities must in our culture work this in a different way from a man who may achieve the same goal. In this context of Sex Duality it makes sense to ask men to develop their intuitive or irrational dimension of thought, for it will involve a different kind of effort for them than it does for women. The normic relation with gender traits recognizes the real situation in which women must struggle in terms of feminine gender traits and men must struggle in terms of masculine gender traits. Self-definition must include reference to their respective collection of gender traits.



### C. Social-Political Properties

If we move into the third area of properties associated with sex identity, the area of social-political properties, the normic relation to one's culture will become even more evident. In all cultures there is a process of sex role socialization. In the specific culture of North American and European patriarchy this involves the specific socialization of women and men into a different relation of power respective to one another. Men have power and women do not (Dixon 1969). Various writers have given different variations on this central sex linked property. Hegel spoke of man and woman in terms of the master-slave relation, Engels of the proletariat and bourgeoisie, Rousseau of the weak and strong, Friedan of the consumer and earner, Lakoff of their invisibility and visibility within language. There are also studies of women's work and men's work at home and outside of the home.(13) The theory of Sex Duality then would claim that women have a normic relation in this culture to powerlessness and men have a normic relation in this culture to power.

Sex Polarity might try to enshrine this difference in relation to power as an essential and analytic difference between the sexes through an appeal to some transcendent explanation such as God or Nature. Sex Unity might try to ignore it. Sex Duality, however, states that to give a thorough explanation of woman or man in our culture the social-political property of power and powerlessness must be included in the definition. This means that for a woman to assume more power or for a man to give away some of his power becomes a creative act in the context of the normic property.

Similarly, it is a different thing for a woman to give away power than it is for a man to give away power. She has been socialized to do so while he has not. The normic property, therefore, is not analytically associated with a particular sex, because there are exceptions. It is not synthetically connected either, because it is a significant and not an arbitrary factor in the definition of the sex identity.

### Normic Definition of Sex Identity

#### A. The Definition

In this paper first we have shown that there is a need for creating a third category of properties between analytic and synthetic. Following Scriven's suggestion we have called this category 'normic'. Then we have shown that in the delineation of properties associated with sex-identity in the three areas of social-biological, social-psychological, and social-political there are several examples of such normic properties. We are now in the position where we can begin to formulate a normic definition of sex-identity using the normic properties which have been discovered above.

In the attempt to give a definition of sex identity, it is necessary to distinguish between a general normic definition and a culture specific normic definition. A general definition would have to be applicable to all

cultures. It could not include gender traits or political properties which are specific to one culture rather than another. Mead has shown that there are no absolute properties in this sense. (1968 and 1969). The theory of family resemblances seems to be most helpful in explaining cultural variety.(14)

There are, however, certain common consequences of being human that women and men share in all cultures. These consequences derive from consciousness and they include a grounding in history, a choice of level of consciousness of the self, and a choice of action. In all three of these time zones: past, present, and future, there is a shared as well as a sexually differentiated component. There is a joint history, a woman's history and a man's history. There is a choice of level of consciousness of self as a self, and a choice of level of consciousness of self as a woman or as a man; and there is a choice of joint action, or action qua woman or qua man. Any definition of sex identity must include these three components.

The general normic definition of the two sexes can be stated as follows:

Women of (x) are persons with female anatomy, female genes, a predominance of female hormones who makes a choice of self, a special relation to the set of feminine gender traits of (x), a situation of being socialized as female in (x), a grounding in (x's) woman's history, and a choice of degree of consciousness of self and action qua woman in (x).

Men of (x) are persons with male anatomy, male genes, a predominance of male hormones, a special relation to male gender traits of (x), a situation of being socialized as male in (x), a grounding in (x's) man's history, and a choice of degree of consciousness of self and action qua man (x).

The question begging in such a definition is obvious. It cannot stand as it is, but must be filled in to be helpful. We can do this by turning to a culture specific normic definition.

Women of (North American and European dominant cultures) are persons with a vagina, uterus, clitoris, breasts, ovarian production, pregnancy, xx chromosomes, a predominance of estrogen, a special relation to the feminine gender traits of North America and Europe (namely, passivity and irrationality), a situation of being socialized as female in patriarchy, (namely as powerless), a grounding in North American and European women's history, and a choice of degree of consciousness of self and action qua woman in North American and European culture.

Men of(North American and European culture) are persons with testes, a penis, semen production, facial hair, xy chromosomes, a predominance of testosterone and progesterone, a special relation to the masculine gender traits of North America, and Europe, (namely, activity and rationality), a situation of being socialized as male in patriarchy, (namely, as powerful), a grounding in North American and European men's history and a choice of degree of consciousness of self and action qua man in North American and European culture.

The above normic definition sets out the collection of normic properties associated with women or with men as well as the general properties relating to our situation as conscious persons in time. Any one of the normic properties may be missing and the person could still be a woman or a man if she or he had the other properties associated with her or his sex. In the case in which more than one property is missing, a decision about sex identity would have to be made depending upon the specific properties missing, for it is impossible to make a general rule about numbers of properties.(15)

#### B. Ethical Consequences of the Definition

The obvious question to be asked at this point is: "Why should we want to define sex identity?" This seems particularly poignant when the above definition is complex, dry, and hardly as dynamic as say Aristotle's definition of man as a rational animal. Aristotle also, significantly had claimed that to be female meant to provide the material cause in reproduction and to be male meant to provide the formal cause in reproduction. He further implied that this biological nature had ethical consequences. A good woman obeyed, and a good man ruled. He believed that if one could delineate what specific function a thing had, then a good member of the class of things would be one which performed that function well. While I do not want to accept Aristotle's specific definitions of man, male or female, or his use of the word 'good' to describe a member of a class that performs a specific function well, I believe he had an important insight into the relation between the 'is' and the 'ought'. This insight has been questioned in the last few centuries, but it merits re-examination. Specifically, if we are able to give a definition (in this case a normic definition) of woman and man, it seems that in some way we can derive an 'ought' from the definition.

Sex Polarity has often derived 'ought's from its belief that there were analytic properties of sex identity. Their claim was expressed as 'In order to be a real woman or man one had to have certain specific properties.' The discovery that there are no analytic properties of sex identity means that one is not able to derive an ought for any specific property.

Sex Unity is today deriving 'oughts' from its belief that there are only synthetic or arbitrary properties of sex identity. Their claim is that women and men ought to completely disregard their differences in the hopes of eventually creating a new society, in which it will not make the difference whether one is a woman or a man.



Sex Duality derives another sort of 'ought' from its definition. It claims that women and men ought to become aware of the difference in their respective contexts for making choices and for acting in the world. It is important that the differences in the contexts be recognized and incorporated. Women's history is an important and significant aspect of woman's context which should be brought into the light and preserved qua history. Similarly, the decisions which women must make around their social-biological, social-psychological and social-political normic properties are unique and should be recognized as such. This means that the Sex Unity position is severely limited. It is based upon the false claim that all sex linked properties are synthetic. Further it attempts to achieve liberation by a denial of the identity of the women who are being 'liberated'. For this reason, it can hardly be considered as the 'only proper feminist response'. Sex Duality seems rather to provide a real and important basis for feminism, and ultimately for the liberation of women and men from the painful rigidity of Sex Polarity.

In conclusion, then it has been shown that it is possible to give a normic definition of sex identity. Furthermore, it has been suggested that the 'ought' which follows from this normic definition is that women and men have different contexts within which to make their decisions in life. There is a still further area which must be explored before we can settle upon what sorts of decisions should be made within these differing contexts. It is my belief that ultimately we must have recourse to a world view for justification of a broader ethical theory.(16) In this light, the attempt to give a normic definition of sex-identity has a significance. It provides the real ground for further research into the general question of: How ought we to live?

FOOTNOTES

1. White (1952) p. 286.
2. Putnam (1975) p. 39.
3. Scriven (1959) p. 861. Scriven's argument has two basic steps: in the first, normic properties of a thing are delineated and in the second, series of analytic disjunctions are made which leaves out one or more of the properties. The large collection of disjunctions then constitute a thorough examination of the thing.
4. I choose to use 'human being' and 'person' interchangeably in contrast to Jaggar (1974) who reserves 'person' as a category for human beings with moral status. My reason for this is a religious conviction that 'person' is a religious and not a moral category. In this way a mentally retarded or insane human being should be considered as a person.
5. To substantiate this point see Garside (1971), Lange (1976), Clarke (1976), and Allen (1976). For example this is seen in Aristotle where a woman cannot be good in the same way as a man because her irrational soul is in control, in Kierkegaard where a woman cannot be religious in the same way as a man because she is unable to grasp and hold onto the paradox, in Kant where a woman cannot follow the categorical imperative because her function is to sense, and in Nietzsche where a woman cannot prepare the way for the superman except by giving birth.
6. Firestone(1971) p. 245.
7. Jaggar(1974) p. 291.
8. It is tempting here to use the now infamous image of 'converging parallel lines' in which train tracks look like they are aiming towards a single point, but when you get closer they always remain parallel.
9. Benjamin (1977).
10. This demand for explanation seems to trouble some female critics of my theory out of a fear that they should have to explain why they might be flat chested, or be aggressive, or some other way in which they do not fit all the normic criteria. It is important to point out that this call for explanation is not meant to be a means for punishing anyone for not having a specific normic property. Rather it underscores the fact that there is an explanation for the lack. For example, a woman who is aggressive may have been brought up in a family situation in which independence and autonomy was encouraged. This is unusual for a female in our culture which tends to reward docility in girls.

11. Clarence Keegan in a verbal presentation of a talk entitled 'The Ontology of Gender' at a Society for Women in Philosophy Western Conference, Chicago, 1978.
12. In her article Favreau cites a study in which girls, when asked questions about mathematical problems using words about things they more commonly have in their environment do better than when asked questions concerning toys used by boys. She also showed that overlapping scores in which girls and boys scored equally high and low at the extremes, but in the middle range on sex might have done a little better, the results are deceptively worded as 'girls are better at' or 'boys are better at'. Tresemer considers Horner's famous conclusion that girls have a will to failure and shows that her study really only proved a limited skill of unscrambling words in a limited classroom situation and that it did not warrant such a generalized conclusion.
13. Coupled with this is the tremendous impact of archetypes of woman as earth-mother, housewife, or houseworker. The history of these patterns bring a great deal to bear on the question of sex identity. See Mead (1968), James (1975), and Jung (1971,1973).
14. F. Waismann (1965, p. 183) describes Wittgenstein's insights into the theory of family resemblances. "Games form a family whose members have family likeness. What constitutes the resemblance of different members of a family? Why, some have the same noses, others the same eyebrows, and others the same walk, or the same manner of speaking, and these similarities overlap in part. We have no need to maintain that they must all have some property in common; for even if there were such a property, it need not be this that constitutes the family likeness. In this sense we will say that the word 'game' does not stand for a concept (in Frege's sense) but for a 'family of concepts'." Similarly, men are related to men and women are related to women in different cultures, by a family resemblance.
15. For example if any xx chromosomes and female anatomy were missing, then it is unlikely that the person being described would be a woman. However, if the breasts and uterus were missing it is still very possible that the person being described is a woman. Certain properties have more significance than others, although each one alone is capable of being missing.
16. It is within this context that the question of transcending sex identity can be raised. That is, there are certain circumstances in which it is important to be conscious of self qua woman or qua man. There are other circumstances in which it is important to be conscious of self qua self. In the latter situation we transcend our sex identity. Equally interesting is the question of transcendental explanations of sex identity. Are women and men created? For what end? All of these questions open the issue far beyond a description of what women and men are.



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